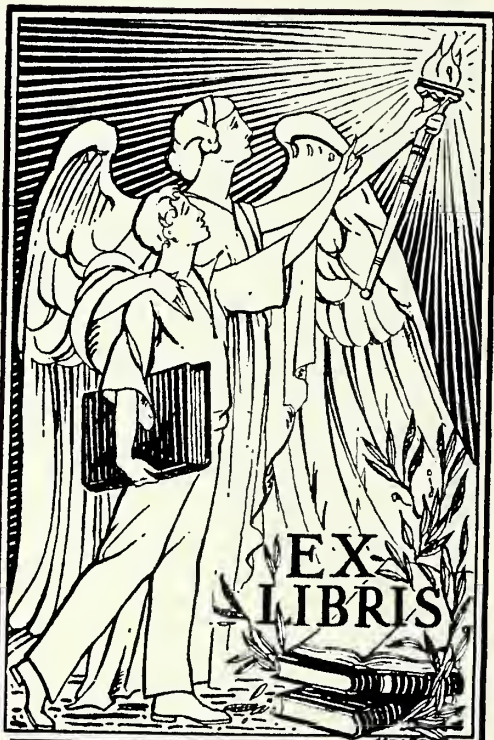


A MAN WITHOUT A WORRY

William A. H. Brnie

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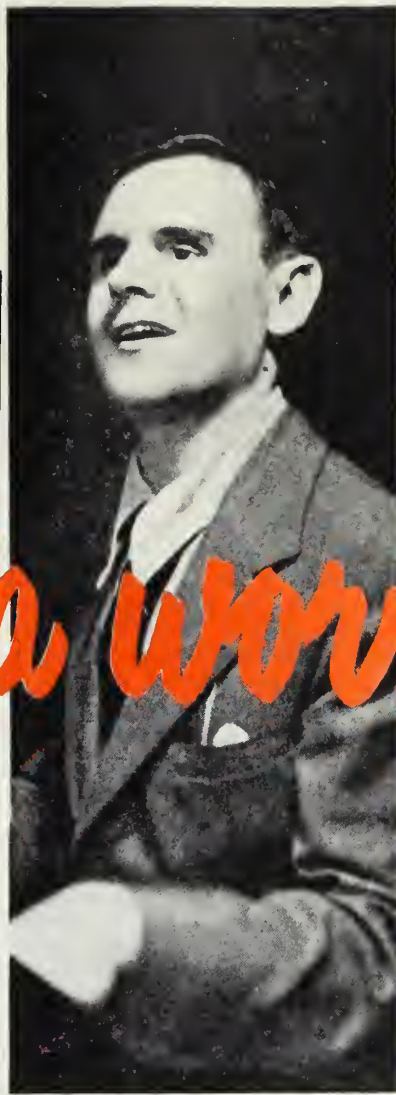


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A MAN

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ACME PHOTO

Alec Templeton, the amazing musical genius, has never seen a note nor an audience. But he's a lot less blind than many of us who over-

look countless paths to happiness every day. Says Alec: "I adore people, and jokes, and music, and the fresh feeling of the wind. What I can't have, I don't think about"



WE WERE talking, amiably and aimlessly, about music—from Goodman to Bach and back again—when I happened to mention that I had a particularly warm spot in my heart for Mozart.

"So have I," beamed Alec Templeton, the blind pianist who is one of the most amazing musicians of today. "Would you like to hear me play one of his piano sonatas?"

"Of course," I said enthusiastically, and Alec felt his way over to the baby grand. For the next twenty minutes I gazed out of that Chicago hotel window over the waters of Lake Michigan, while his fingers produced a ceaseless flow of the graceful, haunting melodies which have placed lonely Mozart among the great immortals of music.

"Thank you, Alec," I said when he finished. "That was beautiful. Really beautiful."

He smiled quizzically. "Ever heard it before?"

"No, I don't believe I have, but . . ."

Then Alec laughed aloud. "That's not surprising. You see, I just wrote it last week."

He went on gaily before I recovered: "Some day I want to give a concert and fool all the critics. I will call it 'Recently Discovered Works by the Great Masters,' and I will include Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Wagner, and all the rest. But what I play will really be my own compositions in their

styles. It'll be a great joke, don't you think?"

Sure, it would be a great joke. I hope he does it, and fools so many critics that they all get over their pompousness and stuffiness, which frighten so many people away from classical music. But the important thing about that incident is that it gives you a pretty clear idea of just what sort of person this Alec Andrew Templeton is—of his incredible musical genius, of his exuberance and delight in life.

Before I met Alec I was pretty well acquainted with his musical gifts. I had seen him, a slender, wiry, youthful figure dwarfed by a huge grand piano, win

By William A. H. Birnie

shouts of applause from a traditionally staid New York audience for a severely classical program. I had seen him grow into a bigger drawing card than Bea Lillie or Edgar Bergen at New York's fashionable Rainbow Room, where he featured his delightful satires on old-fashioned grand opera, on amateur performances of Gilbert and Sullivan, on wheezy, asthmatic *Lieder* singers.

I knew that Benny Goodman's recording of his swing piece, *Bach Goes to Town*, invariably starts the jitterbugs jittering, and I knew that a leading orchestra has already arranged a world première for his *First Symphony*. I knew, too, that his skillfully mixed programs of popular and classical music were fast making him one of radio's most popular artists. But I hadn't known—couldn't have known—that he is (if you will excuse a weary adjective) one of the happiest human beings in the world.

"I adore life," he told me one afternoon. "I adore every minute and second of it. I adore people, and jokes, and music, and the fresh feeling of the wind as it blows off a lake. What I can't have, I don't think about."

I have heard other people say things like that, but I always figured they were talking through their hat. I believe every word of it from Alec.

But he's blind, you'll remind me. Yes, he is blind, but I honestly think that if there is one word in the English language whose meaning Alec doesn't comprehend, it's that word, *blind*. He was born without sight—has never seen an automobile or his mother's face—but in twenty-eight years he has not learned to think of himself as handicapped. I doubt if he is going to start now.

Not long ago, his father, Andrew Templeton, who travels with him on his concert tours, asked Alec what he would want if he could have four wishes come true.

"Well," replied Alec, "first I'd like another grand piano. Then I'd like to compose a symphony like Beethoven's *Pastoral* . . ."

It doesn't make any difference what the other two wishes were for. Neither of them was for the sight which he lives happily and completely without.

ONE night, a few weeks ago, Alec was the guest of honor at a private club in Chicago. He was going to play some of his musical travesties for the sheer fun of it. He is something of a musical spendthrift. He plays oftener just because he feels like it than because he is getting paid for it. When the master of ceremonies introduced him, he held forth on Alec's incredible musical memory.

"He has," the speaker said, "the greatest memory for music of this age."

Alec looked up and grinned. "Don't forget Art," he said.

The speaker hesitated. "Art who?" he asked in an undertone.

"Why, Art Toscanini."

The fact is that Alec's musical memory is amazing. He learns music simply by hearing it at concerts, on phonograph records, or played by friends. After his first hearing of the difficult *Emperor Concerto* of Beethoven, he bought the records on the way home. He played them over three times—then started playing the concerto himself on his own piano.

Twenty-four hours later, he knew it, note-perfect. An exceptional musician would need at least a month of steady work to learn it—the average music student could never learn it by heart.

ANOTHER time, he met Nathan Milstein, the youthful violinist, after the latter gave a concert. Alec told him he was sorry he hadn't been able to attend, because he was anxious to hear him play.

"I'd play for you now," Milstein replied, "if I only had my fiddle here."

"Borrow mine," said another violinist who was present.

Milstein took it, tuned it, and then invited Alec to accompany him. "Do you know Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole*?" he asked.

"I think so," Alec replied, and hit the first chords.

When they finished, Milstein complimented him on the dexterity of his accompaniment. "Thank you," said Alec. "I was a little worried. You see, I never played it before."

Milstein was flabbergasted. "Then how could you . . . ?"

"Oh, I've heard it, though," Alec explained. "I heard it at a concert in New York a year—no, two years ago."

Don't expect me to explain such a gift—nor Alec, either. Do you think Edison could explain what went on in his head as he sat in his lonely little laboratory and invented the electric light? Alec remembers music just as you and I remember the outline of a novel we've read, or the look of the street we live on. Ask him exactly how, and he's as nonplussed as if someone asked you exactly how you remember the taste of lamb chops.

He was never really without the talent; he was virtually born playing the piano. When Alec was four, his mother, an enthusiastic if strictly amateur pianist, was taking his seven-year-old sister through a simple melody. The girl played it over correctly half a dozen times. Satisfied, Mrs. Templeton ended the lesson for the day and sent her down the street to do an errand.

Five minutes later she heard the melody issuing from the music-room. She hurried in to reprimand her daughter for lingering over the piano. Instead, she found little Alec at the instrument, his chubby fingers beating out the melody he had never studied—and never heard until his sister had played it a few moments before.

"I started Alec on finger exercises when he was three," Mrs. Templeton

told me. "He wrote his first composition, a melody of sixteen bars, before he was five, and when he was six he was so far advanced musically that the rest of the family practically gave up playing. He made us all feel silly."

Music was an accepted part of the home life on the Templeton farm in Wales, where Alec was born. Both Mr. and Mrs. Templeton played and sang creditably, and there were musicians on both sides of the family, although none of them was a concert artist. Alec's two older sisters were taught to play the piano just as they were taught to sew and cook. With Alec, it was different. During his first lessons, his mother sensed that music was going to be a vital, throbbing part of his life. But she didn't allow that to warp his normal development.

"When I first got over the shock that I had a little boy who would never see," she told me while Alec ran over a new composition in the next room, "I decided I would never let him realize he was handicapped. We treated him exactly as we treated his sisters."

The result was that Alec had to put away his toys himself when he was through with them, just like any other child, and he was often sent trotting upstairs to get his mother's handkerchief or his father's cigarettes in the second drawer of the bureau. That early training made him self-reliant, asking and expecting no quarter from anyone. He managed so well, in fact, that he was eight years old before he learned that he was at all different from other children. Then an elderly lady picked him up once when he stumbled over a chair and, dusting him off, exclaimed, "You poor, brave, blind little boy!"

THAT night, as his mother was tucking him into bed, Alec said, "A lady said I was blind today. What does that mean, Mother?"

She told him then, as well as she could through her tears, but he didn't seem to mind what he was missing. And he doesn't today. One afternoon we were walking along the Lake Michigan drive in Chicago, my shoulder barely touching his, when he asked me to describe a building we were passing.

"Well," I said, "it's very tall."

"How tall?" he persisted.

"Let's see," I said, searching for a symbol he could grasp. "Suppose you piled a thousand pianos on top of each other. That's about as tall as the building is."

"Oh," exclaimed Alec. "I see."

He uses the word *see* so naturally you actually forget he never has seen. "See you tomorrow," he says when you leave him.

Once he was telling me about one of his most treasured memories—a visit to the house where Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany. "They let me run my fingers over the (Continued on page 63)

A MAN without a worry

(Continued from page 54)

keys of his piano," he said, excitement throbbing in his voice. "It was the very piano Beethoven composed the *Moonlight Sonata* on. And they let me hold some of his actual manuscripts. I could see where he had made changes in his own handwriting."

Somehow, sightless though he is I think Alec did see those changes more clearly than most of the thousands of tourists who tramp through Beethoven's *Geburtshaus* every year.

Alec's childhood and youth were a series of musical milestones. He learned to read Braille, but literature has never meant as much to him as melody. He made his first public appearance before he was ten, and when he was twelve he played over the British Broadcasting System. He tutored at home until he entered Worcester College, where he studied the organ under Sir Ivor A. Atkins, and the nearly lost art of improvising under Sir Henry Walford Davies, Master of the King's Music. Later came four years at the Royal College of Music, then a tumultuous debut in London. Three years ago British Bandmaster Jack Hylton brought him to this country as a specialty artist, and Alec stayed when the outfit broke up. Successful as he was back in England, he had never enjoyed universal recognition until he came here. He has already taken out his first citizenship papers.

"I think America likes me," he says simply. "I know I like America."

He is a remarkable showman, infecting his audiences with the delicious sense of fun that he derives from music himself. One night at the Rainbow Room, when he had planned to play a heavier program than usual, he astonished his father by playing nothing but the lightest portions of his repertory. The applause was tremendous.

"There was something about the audience," Alec explained to his father afterward. "I could smell that they didn't want any serious stuff."

Generally, his programs consist of a few traditional, classical numbers and then several of his own specialties, in which he takes his hearers painlessly into the inner workings of music. He might ask people in the audience to call out five notes—any five notes—and proceed to improvise on them, just as old Johann Sebastian Bach used to do on his organ. Or he might improvise on four or five well-known melodies (I've heard him do it with such a varied assortment as Handel's

Largo, Yankee Doodle, the theme of the first movement of Brahms's *Second Symphony*, Schubert's *Serenade*, and *A Tisket, a Tasket*), weaving them into an intricate, absorbing pattern which even the musical illiterate can follow with pleasure.

Or he might take some popular tune and play it in the individual styles of Mozart, Puccini, Debussy, and Johann Strauss. Musicians are always astonished at Alec's ability to improvise on the spur of the moment. It's as if you gave a poet a subject, and five minutes later he handed you a perfectly constructed and rhymed sonnet. Alec himself can't explain how he does it. "Music just forms itself in patterns in my head, I guess," is all he says.

He usually includes one of his own serious piano compositions on his programs, explaining simply just what he was trying to express; and one of his lighter pieces, *Bach Goes to Town*, or *Mozart Matriculates*, explaining then how positive he is that both of these composers would be writing swing if they were alive today. And he might play his satire on an actual performance of *Pinafore* he once heard in Connecticut, in which the chorus came in off key and one beat behind the orchestra.

THEY'RE all remarkably good fun, and remind you of cigar-smoking, life-loving Brahms's remark that music should be listened to in an "unbuttoned mood."

"I agree with him," says Alec. "People should unbutton their vests, unhook their stays, and just enjoy music. There's nothing difficult about it, but most people make such work of listening to music. They remind me of the old-fashioned teacher who told his pupil: 'You will never be a good

gay little melody based on those two notes. 'That is my idea of the cuckoo bird,' he explained.

He thinks of people, too, in terms of music. Instead of remembering someone as tall, or dark, or sporting a waxed mustache, he thinks of the key of their voices. Mine, I learned, is G sharp minor, by the way. This method of cataloguing people apparently serves him just as well as eyes. We were in the elevator in a radio station one day when half a dozen people crowded in at one floor. Each of them greeted Alec.

"Hello, Jean," he said. "Hello, Peggy, and Bill, and Helen. . . ." He didn't hesitate over a single name, although most of the people were casual, professional acquaintances.

HIS bubbling good humor embraces all forms of music. He is the only musician I know who can get along equally well with a swing drummer, a classical cellist, and a church organist. That is a large order, but I've seen him do it. And he can laugh about music, too.

It happens that Beethoven's obtuse *Hammerklavier Sonata* is one of his favorite compositions, but he grinned delightedly when I confessed I had slept through a performance in New York recently. Then he told me about a pianist he knew who had always longed to play the *Hammerklavier* in a recital. His managers wouldn't let him, because they thought it was too tedious for his audiences, but finally he fooled them. After one recital, he played a light Chopin étude for the first encore—and, for the second, the *Hammerklavier*, the whole three quarters of an hour of it! And he walked off the stage afterward, pleased as punch with himself, although there weren't fifty people left in the audience at the end.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Alec is so well adjusted to his way of life—and is able to communicate his happiness to others—is that he doesn't take himself too seriously. He has the fortunate ability, rare among artists, of seeing himself in a proper perspective. Not ten minutes after I met him, he was playing something he called merely "Legend Number Two."

"Listen," he said. "There's an exciting, vital passage at the beginning, then a middle section with a warm, flowing melody, then a climax with a tonal effect of Russian bells."

Yes, it was all there in the music.

"But I need a story to go with it," Alec sighed, swinging around on his piano stool. "Can't you give me one—some folk tale you've read, or something you've made up?"

I couldn't help him, but I appreciated what that simple request meant. He is completely free from the affectations that afflict most people on whom the fickle spotlight of popularity shines. Most of them are so wrapped up in their own importance that they would never deign to invite the collaboration of an outsider.

But I have no doubt that Alec will work out a story himself to fit "Legend Number Two"—a bright, shining story, with no shadows and no doubts, because Alec knows neither.

ARDOR—1939



*Rossetti labored long to tell
About his blessed damozel,
And Wordsworth sat up half the night
To coin, "A phantom of delight";
The Bard himself took pains to say
His love was like a summer's day.
But that was years and years ago,
And since then things are streamlined so
Today we are content to covet,
"You've oomph, my girl, and plenty of it!"*

ALYCE HAMILTON

musician. You enjoy music too much."

Alec gets as much kick out of hearing a new sound in the rumble of a great metropolis, or producing a novel melody on his piano, as you and I do out of making a new friend. Any little stimulus can start music running through his head. While I was with him one day his mother brought him a new cuckoo clock. Alec listened delightedly when the hour struck and a little bird chirped two notes—B and G, he told me instantly, for he is gifted with absolute pitch. Then he stepped over to his piano and improvised a



Many Americans seem to think it's hopelessly old-fashioned to have more than the average of 2 or 3 children. But here's a mother of 12 who thinks you're an amateur if you don't go right on and have more and more youngsters. We all hear a lot about the so-called advantages of birth control and small families, but here's a new, challenging side to the argument:

"Who's afraid of another baby?"



Twelve reasons for having a large family . . . "And I'd do it all over again," says Mrs. Rose

you amateur parents

WHEN I had only nine children and was wondering whether there would be more, I met at a woman's club one day a member who had found out about my monumental family. So she wanted to know if I had married in haste and repented at leisure.

I think I made the logical answer. I may have married in haste, but so far I certainly hadn't had much leisure for repentance.

That was several years ago. Since then the family has gone into double figures. There are twelve buds on the rosebush—seven boys and five girls—half of them too big to be called buds any more. The oldest is twenty-four, the youngest is half past eight. And now, perhaps, I have time to repent at leisure.

But, thinking the matter over, I have been unable to find a nickel's worth of repentance in my system. Under the same conditions and granted the same good luck, I'd do it all over again.

If you came calling about eight o'clock in the morning you would probably wonder why. At that time of day I find life fairly crowded. The autocrat of the breakfast table is waiting for a soft-boiled egg with one eye on the clock and the other wandering in search of his hat. The oldest daughter and second son are wolfing through breakfast to catch the same train. Another daughter is giving me a helping hand before she departs for her own day's work at nine o'clock.

A boy and girl of jitterbug age must be off to high school by eight o'clock. Six other sons and daughters are spread over the elementary-school system like an epidemic of measles. On an average weekday morning there are four complaints of lost schoolbooks, one broken shoestrings, an accident with an oatmeal

dish, and two telephone calls about an arithmetic lesson, while the front door slams at least eleven times between 7:45 and 8:30.

After that I have the house to myself until lunchtime.

You may have noted that I have accounted only for the man of the house and eleven youngsters. The oldest boy is away from home. I don't have to get his breakfast, or see that he washes behind his ears and wears his shirt right side out. But, since he is engaged to be married and is living by his wits and impudence in New York, he is not altogether out of range of my maternal solicitude.

But after twenty-five years of matrimony, and in spite of the wear and tear of a twelve-cylinder family, I'm still in

BY MARJORIE W. ROSE

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